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YUGOSLAVIA:

Ethnic Tensions Continue in Croatia

The referendum on Serb autonomy was held yesterday in Serb-populated parts of Croatia without incident; however, tensions are such that the slightest incident could set off a bloody confrontation and lead to demands for federal military intervention. [REDACTED]

Although the referendum occurred without interference from Croatian or federal authorities, armed Serbs still control at least three towns in the region. The referendum's organizer, Serbian leader Jovan Raskovic, is seeking talks with Croatian President Tudjman to defuse the situation. Tudjman continues to blame Serbian strongman Milosevic and other Serb outsiders of trying to destabilize Croatia and bring down his government. The Slovene government has echoed Tudjman's criticism of Serbia and called on Belgrade to bring the Serbs under control. [REDACTED]

Belgrade, while urging calm, issued another strong warning to those advocating a violent solution to the country's political crisis. President Jovic, a Serb, stated that the collective presidency will act, if necessary, to prevent civil war but that citizens—read Serbs—“have the right to declare themselves politically.” A spokesman for the federal Army said the military has the responsibility to prevent fratricidal war in any part of Yugoslavia and would carry out this task “unconditionally.” The official denied the Army was involved in a plan to destabilize Croatia and warned Raskovic and others not to attempt to manipulate the military for political reasons. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The confrontation on Friday between the Serbs and the Croats almost certainly illustrated to all sides how quickly the situation can escalate toward armed confrontation. Although the referendum was mostly peaceful, Croatia's nationalist government will closely monitor how the republic's Serbian minority tries to articulate its “autonomy.” Tudjman will be particularly sensitive to any evidence of involvement by Milosevic or his supporters. The Croatian President may come under intense pressure to regain the Serb-controlled towns, a move almost certainly to be met by armed resistance. [REDACTED]

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